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## Exploring the possibilities of curriculum innovation in initial language teacher education

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### Abstract

The abundance of studies dedicated to the analysis of the possibilities of curricular innovations in general and in the domain of Language Didactics at the level of students' initial training in particular renders the importance of such an aspect. Using content analysis doubled by the application and interpretation of semi-structured interview, our paper presents a statistics of 102 teachers' perception on the difficulties which they encountered at the level of their initial training and also offers proposals and solutions for the improvement of this process coming from the teachers themselves. The study is relevant and valuable through the offering of first hand signalling of difficulties and solutions proposed as a result of their own direct observation in the practice of teaching (during the initial training stage and in the stage of their teaching profession) with the purpose of developing an innovative curricular programme in teaching languages.

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### 1. Introduction

On the recent background of the necessity of innovation in education, some of the most important aspects in initial training programmes of language teachers as analyzed by specialists (Davis & Kelly, 2001, 2002) are: objectives, content, changes, needs, measures. Numerous analyses of these aspects have introduced a perspective upon teacher-education programmes as being reduced in terms of time span, technologically impoverished, and not having the necessary conceptual clarity and programmatic consistency and coherence (Goodlad, 1991; Bennett, 1996). A reconsideration and reconstruction of teacher education has become obvious, but despite the bulk of research literature on the pedagogical support of initial teacher education, with specific focus on the roles of schools and higher education in improving professional learning of new teachers (Booth et al., 1990), there are relatively few studies comprising proposals of strategies of managing change in initial teacher education. Though the last decade has produced an important number of studies on the management of change and the process of change in teachers' education, we consider that a perspective which was not covered enough was that which passed beyond the simple transmission of knowledge and made a correlation between academic background, theoretical and, most

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importantly, practical knowledge of the science of pedagogy, insisting upon the development of competencies through practical experience. This generalist view is necessary so as to be able to reach the last stage of superior qualitative forming of professionals and successful insertion on the labour market.

After the understanding of this last formulated “philosophy” of the act of teachers’ training the primary change upon which most specialists agree is the passing from a focus on the curriculum to a much larger extent of focusing and granting a more privileged position to the participants. Thus, the current policy emphasis is on giving teachers and students more flexibility in the curriculum, particularly by encouraging teachers to play the role of innovators and by developing children’s innovating and creative mindsets (Williamson and Payton, 2009) and critical thinking (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). This last aspect of forming the critical thinking of the actors taking part in the process of education, and making them question, critique and challenge the educational act is capital because the establishing of an equilibrium between practice and knowledge can help them surpass “a damaging dichotomy” which makes novice teachers regard theory as something authoritarian and prescriptive (Hedgecock, 2002) and not develop their own personal judgement(s), but fall victims of the tensions arising from these new theoretical and practical challenges of the educational act (Garrido & Alvarez, 2006). This is how it has become obvious that students’ educational profiles and teachers’ professional statuses can only be developed by forming positive, pro-active attitudes towards change, by plunging into the participants’ cognitive worlds and personal teaching/learning practices (Freeman & Richards, 1996), ultimately by encouraging personal research skills and motivating development of a personal style.

Another important perspective introduces the passage towards the current need to produce a pre-service curriculum based on the logic of the professional act, breaking with the “traditional split of disciplines in the following teaching blocks: general and scientific, technological and practice” (Raisky, 1993). In the context of teaching languages, Kleinhenz (2007) points out that “language expertise and educational expertise need to be brought together”. Therefore, research in the practice of teaching, has tried to focus more on language teachers’ perception of what they do: “what they know about language teaching, how they think about their classroom practices” (apud Valez-Rendon, 2002) so that they could be able to permanently improve the process of education by their own practices as well improve their own personalities and professional profile.

In the spirit of our theory on teaching, seen as a closed loop circle which, unlike a linear model, assumes a permanent movement from one level of education to another (from parent to student and then to teacher and school, community, legislators, the government and back to level one), we support the idea that learning to teach is a continuous process. Other researchers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) present the same idea insisting upon the importance of different cognitive, affective, individual and contextual factors in designing and performing in an educational act/process. From this perspective the professional act itself must be the fulcrum of the curriculum, both as an object of knowledge and as a training practice. In other words, in the context of the rapid evolution of society, by such an approach, initial training should create opportunities for forming both abilities (competencies) specific to the didactic profession but also secondary experiences facilitating the meeting of societal demands.

Various studies have tried to offer an inventory of the factors which have to be taken into consideration in teachers’ education. Thus, Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) enumerate as important factors: teachers’ decisions and judgments which are based on their own educational experiences; their personality type; their philosophy of language and how languages and cultures are learned; their particular context, including social and power structures of school communities as places that create and sustain meanings; their understanding of students, with collective and individual needs – as persons, as learners, as developing language learners and users; and the social, cultural and political contexts which constitute their professional landscape. Harbon (2010) further explored these essential aspects and added his elements: the increasing impact of policies and regulations upon the programme design; the crowded curriculum in language teacher education; preparing native speakers for the classroom; developing a language-specific and generic stance; demands on the pre-service teachers regarding proficiency levels and pedagogical understandings; the special considerations in preparing teachers for community language schools and in pre-service programmes; steady decline in the number of teachers qualified to teach languages in schools, partly a reflection of the community’s concern with language learning. Some researchers propose even some solutions: (Kleinhenz et al., 2007): promoting language teaching as a profession through advertising campaigns targetting specific groups; improving financial and other incentives for senior school students to study languages to senior levels; providing more opportunities for non-registered teachers to attend language teaching courses; encouraging

collaborative partnerships between schools and universities; improving communication between teacher educators and language educators; using professional standards as a basis to improve assessment of pre-service and graduate teachers; providing professional learning opportunities for school principals and school leadership teams to learn about the Programme Standards; encouraging in-country experience and the use of information and communication technology to extend students' knowledge of the target language and culture. In our study we are trying to inventory such aspects in the context of the Romanian language teachers' initial training programmes.

## **2. Study on language teachers' perception of curricular innovations at the level of the Romanian initial training programmes**

### *2.1. Objective and hypothesis*

The objective of the current research consists in the identification of the language teachers' perceptions of curricular innovations at the level of the Romanian initial training programmes concerning the difficulties and solutions.

#### *Hypothesis*

How do language teachers respond to curricular innovations in terms of difficulties and solutions at the level of the Romanian initial training programmes?

### *2.2. Research lot*

102 language teachers participated to this study: 74 from pre-university education and 28 from university education; 58 teachers of Romanian literature and language, 36 of English literature and language, 18 of French literature and language.

### *2.3. Method*

We used a semi-structured interview to identify the main elements related to curricular innovations. The items of the interview guide were analyzed with 12 experts from Romanian education system with the specialization Educational sciences.

### *2.4. Variables*

The dependent variables are represented by the main elements related to the curricular innovations (new aspects, difficulties, solutions). The independent variables are: level of education (pre-university, university), the specialization (Romanian, English, French).

### *2.5. Procedure*

The interview was prepared and organized in the period September-November 2012. Firstly, the interview guide was analyzed with experts in September. Secondly, the participants to the interview were selected in collaboration with the County School Inspectorate of Bacău and with the help of social media tools in language teacher education. Thirdly, the interview with the language teachers was organized in November in four series with 20 participants. Finally, a national conference was organized to present and disseminate the results of the interview.

### *2.6. Research results*

In order to demonstrate the hypothesis, the thematic content analysis was used. Taking into account the language teachers' answers, we established the categories and the specific themes at the level of the two categories of

indicators. Referring to the difficulties encountered in initial training programmes from the perspective of curricular innovations, the analysis of obtained frequencies of the participants' answers indicates that language teachers perceive mostly the aspects of the educational content, but also regard as quite important aspects connected to the students and resources, or to managerial aspects and the relevant proposed strategies (Table 1):

Table 1. Categories and specific themes regarding the difficulties perceived by language teachers at the level of initial training programmes from the perspective of curricular innovations

Categories	Specific themes
<b>Educational contents (72)</b>	the stress laid on the theoretical component in forming pedagogical competences (21); the lack of connection between theory and practice (12); large volume of knowledge, oversaturated curriculum (11); the lack of correlation between educational content, school syllabi and the future needs of professional integration (7); the reduced number of hours of practice and specialty didactics (7); the lack of adaptation of the contents to students' psychological particularities in secondary school (6); the discrepancy between the objectives within the initial training programmes and the need of forming students' competences as future language teachers (4); the inflexible and rigid nature of the content specific to pedagogical competences (4)
<b>Student-related difficulties (16)</b>	the lack of students' motivation towards the process of initial training of pedagogical competences (7); the anxiety in front of the students for which the practice is to be done (5); the fear of trying something new (4)
<b>Resources (12)</b>	the lack of material resources (7); the inappropriate use of technical devices (5)
<b>On the system and process of education (11)</b>	the lack of specialists trainers (4); the inflexibility of the system of education (4); the insufficient human resources (3)
<b>Managerial aspects (10)</b>	the short period of time allotted to the formation of pedagogical competences (6); pressuring deadlines (4)
<b>Training strategies (10)</b>	lack of modern training strategies (4); lack of practical models and examples (4); lack pedagogical exercise (2)

Regarding the solutions at the level of initial training programmes from the perspective of curricular innovations, the analysis of obtained frequencies indicates that language teachers perceive the importance of such aspects related the educational content and offer important solutions in terms of proposed strategies for the improvement of problematic or negative aspects, but there is also valuable insight in terms of nature of resources (Table 2):

Table 2. Categories and specific themes regarding the solutions perceived by language teachers at the level of initial training programmes from the perspective of curricular innovations

Categories	Specific themes
<b>Educational contents (109)</b>	Laying a stress on the practical approach of pedagogical competences, offering more practical examples (31); increasing the number of practice (more hours to teach in the classroom and to assist for students) (22); ensuring the correlation between pedagogical competences and other categories of competences (managerial, technological (14); adapting the content to the realities of the contemporary school, to the psychological particularities of students in secondary school and to the language teachers' needs of training (11); ensuring the correlation between the content of the lectures and those of the seminars, between theory and practice (8); introducing combined practice (7); developing competences of analysis and design of school documents (6); the correlation between pedagogical and methodological content (3); increasing novelty elements in the taught content within the programme of language teachers initial training (3) interdisciplinary approach (2); focus on objectives (2)
<b>Training strategies (73)</b>	revaluing simulation methods during seminars (sequences of viewed/taught lessons, role play) (16); using student centred methods (13); using active methods of teaching-learning based on action (11); using interactive methods (8); using group work (7); ensuring the application of various training strategies (6); revaluing case studies, debates and current educational problem solving (6); using methods of critical thinking (2); performing non-formal educational activities (2); facilitating differentiated activities (2)
<b>Resources (77)</b>	using modern technologies in language teachers' training (26); facilitated and free access to didactic materials proposed during initial training programmes (22); supporting students' training by means of auxiliary materials (10); ensuring the variety of sources of information (9); using applicative didactic means, based on concrete situations from the educational practice (4); designing a series of specific didactic materials specific for the formation of predictive teachers' pedagogical

### 3. Conclusions

The large number of studies published in the last decade (especially in the last three years) is a clear testimony that the issue of curricular innovations in language teachers initial training programme represents a process undergoing important updating and restructuring as they have to respond to students' needs and professional integration requirements. An increasing number of countries are borrowing models of reforms from countries which have managed to implement successfully such models so as to achieve an alignment to a unitary type of education in initial training stages for individuals who would thus be able to be inserted not only a national labour market, but on an European (if not global) labour market. The study demonstrates that the most important aspects connected to the aspect of language teachers' initial training could be easily amended as they are connected first and foremost to aspects concerning the theoretical corpus and the employed strategies, and, more importantly, to achieving a connection between theory and practice (as it is done by students in their initial training stage and later by teachers in their profession), but also to aspects related to the variety of strategies and existing resources that could be used. Last but not least, there is the aspect of forming both students' and teachers' attitudes towards innovative and challenging aspects of education as they have to correlate with the changes in the contemporary fast moving society, an aspect which has to have in view the forming and developing of competences in general and pedagogical competences in particular.

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